

Elements of Culture

Culture is the total of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors shared by and passed on by the members of a specific group. Culture acts as a blueprint for how a group of people should behave if they want to fit in with the group. It ties us to one group and separates us from other groups—and helps us to solve the problems that all humans face. Culture involves factors such as food and shelter, education, religion, security/protection, familial (family) relationships, and political and social systems. Listed below are the Seven Elements of Culture:

- Social Organization.
- Customs and Traditions.
- Religion.
- Language.
- Arts and Literature.
- Government Systems
- Economic Systems

A group that shares a geographic region, a sense of identity, and a culture is called a **society**. Sometimes you will hear the term **ethnic group** used to refer to a specific group that shares a language, customs, and a common heritage. An ethnic group has an identity as a separate group of people within the region where they live. For example, the San peoples—known as the

Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa—live in a specific territory, speak their own language, and have a social organization distinct (different) from other groups living in the region.

Social Organization

Social organization creates social structure by organizing its members into small units to meet basic needs. Family is the most important unit of social organization and it is through the family that children learn how they are expected to act and what to believe. Social Organization can be broken down into three categories:

- The **nuclear family** consists of a wife, husband, and children. This is a typical family in an industrial society (i.e. United States).
- The **extended family** includes several generations living in one household, working and living together and respect for elders is strong.
- **Social classes** rank people in order of status, depending on what is important to the culture (money, job, education, ancestry, etc.)

Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions are the rules of behavior that enforce ideas of right and wrong. They can be customs, traditions, rules, or written laws. For example, Brazil has numerous traditions, from sports to dance to religious rites. Capoeira, a home-grown martial art, is based on self-defense practices devised by African slaves. This art is practiced by many in Brazil as well as other countries.

Religion

An aspect of culture that has a great deal of influence on people's lives is religion. **Religion** consists of a belief in a supernatural power or powers that are regarded as the creators and maintainers of the universe. Religions establish beliefs and values that define how people worship the divine being or divine forces and how they behave toward each other. Traditionally, religions have been categorized as one of three types:

- **monotheistic**, with a belief in one god
- **polytheistic**, with a belief in many gods
- **animistic** or traditional, often with a belief in divine forces in nature

Language

Language is the cornerstone of culture. Language is one of the most important aspects of culture because it allows the people within a culture to communicate with each other. Language reflects all aspects of culture, including the physical area occupied by the society. For example, a society that lives in the subarctic or tundra region may have many different words to describe various forms of snow. However, those words would be useless for a culture in a place with no snow.

Arts and Literature

All cultures have ways of expressing themselves creatively. The environment and culture in which an artist lives is reflected in the artistic product. Cultures produce performing arts, visual arts, and literature.

Performing arts developed by a culture often include music, dance, theater, and film. Music is a cultural aspect found in all societies. The instruments on which the music is played and the style of music are unique to each group.

Visual arts include architecture, painting, sculpture, and textiles. The style of the visual arts will reflect materials available in the region and cultural themes.

Oral and written literature, such as poems, folk tales, and stories, often illustrate aspects of the culture such as attitudes and behaviors. They can also be a reflection of the environment in which they are produced.

Government Systems

People form governments, or a society's laws and political institutions, to provide for their common needs, keep order within society, and protect their society from outside threats. For example, the United States has a democratic form of government. A democratic government (or democracy) is a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through freely elected representatives.

Economic Systems

An economic system describes how people use limited resources to satisfy their wants and needs and answers the basic economic questions: what to produce, how to produce it, and for whom.

There are several types of economies:

- Traditional Economy: people produce most of what they need to survive (hunting, gathering, farming, herding cattle, make own clothes/tools).
- Market Economy: buying and selling goods and services
- Command Economy: Government controls what/how goods are produced and what they cost. Individuals have little economic power
- Mixed Economy: Individuals make some economic decisions and the government makes others.

Reading adapted from *The Elements of Culture*, World History